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A Qualitative Study on Personality Traits of Negative Perfectionist

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Abstract

Objective By comparing the personality traits of negative perfectionist and non-negative perfectionist, the article studies the differences on cognition, emotion and motivation between the two groups. **Methods** A qualitative study was conducted. Four negative perfectionists and two non-negative perfectionists were interviewed by semi-structural ways. Qualitative data was analyzed. **Results** Cognition: Authority always makes the negative perfectionist oppressive. The self-evaluation of negative perfectionist is dominated by negative composition; to non-negative perfectionist, it involves both negative and positive composition. Both of the two groups are sensitive to the interpersonal environment. The former concentrates on the critics of other individuals, whereas the later converges on the acute awareness and analytical understanding of interpersonal environment. Emotion: The former is apt to be anxious and take a negative reaction, while the latter prefers to take a relatively positive reaction to cope anxious emotion. Motivation: The former pursues a comfortable life style, whereas the latter is inclined to experience various styles of life. **Conclusion** Negative perfectionist mostly experience negative feelings, motivations, and cognitions; on the contrary, the non-negative perfectionist is inclined to experience positive ones.

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1. Introduction

Perfectionism is closely related to the mental health of individuals and psychological counseling and therapy (Ablard, K. E. & Parker, W. D., 1997). The following two points of views are commonly seen in the Literatures studying on perfectionism: Burns (1980), Pacht (1984), Weisinger and Lobsenz, as the representative of this view, declare the negativity of perfectionism. On the other hand, Hamachek (1978), Ashby and Kottman (1996), in the perspective of dichotomy (Fang, X., et al., 2007), believe that perfectionism should be both negative and positive and divide it into two types, namely neurotic perfectionism and Normal Perfectionism. The negative elements of perfectionism are as follow: stubbornly insisting on the belief that negative events will repeatedly happen; suffering from “Should” principle; constantly setting high objective and accordingly suffering from frustration; never

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obtaining sense of achievements despite success; strong sense of inferiority. The latter opinion has attracted more supporting researches.

The research objective of this paper is set to be negative perfectionism, namely, those who scored highly in negative dimension yet performed not very well in positive dimension. Fei Zi (2006) ever illuminated the interrelation between the individual's fears of authority and the negativity of perfectionism. Then, in the perspective of cognition, what is the attitude of negative perfectionists who are afflicted with "should" principle towards authority? The author adopts Interview Method and through inquiring the interviewee's image of authority, learns their subconscious perception of authority. This method originates from *Image Dialog* (Zhu, Jianjun., 2004) which refers to a way of communication with one's subconscious ego. The consultant executes the therapy or consultation by guiding the counselee to communicate with the image appeared in his or her mind. Each image indicates distinctive meaning. What kind of animal shall the negative perfectionists regard the authority and themselves as? How will they assess themselves and how will they respond to others' assessments? These questions are to be focused on.

As for emotion, which kind of emotion will dominate life of negative perfectionists? Freud, in his *The Interpretation of Dreams* (ed. by Che, Wenbo., 2004), claimed that although being divided into wish dreams, anxiety dreams and punishment dreams, dreams is the fulfillment of wish. Besides, a research of Fei Zi (2009) shows that the manifest content of anxiety dreams consists of several segments of the memory of similar anxious events and through the analyzing and arranging of these segments, we can discover the main anxious events the dreamer has experienced a period of time before dreaming. That is to say, dreams to some extent reflect the individual's emotion in actual life. Then, what do negative perfectionists usually dream about? How do these dreams reflect their emotional state? Similarly, as for motivation, negative perfectionists are afraid of failure but unceasingly encounter frustration. In such a mood, what are their lifestyles like? How shall they plan their future? These questions are to be discussed.

2. Objective & Method

This paper adopts the methods of qualitative research and interviews six university students. The selection of interviewees is on the basis of Negative Perfectionism Questionnaire (ZNPQ) (Zi, F., 2007) which includes five dimensions, namely, "hesitation" "fear of failure" "over-scrupulous" "excessive plan and control" and "high objective and strict norm". Cronbach' α among dimensions is respectively .82, .78, .83, .76, and .75. In addition, these interviewees filled in the Positive Perfectionism Questionnaire (ZPPQ) (Zi, F., 2008) which includes three dimensions: "positive self-expectation", "positive logic" and "positive self-evaluation". The Cronbach's α : .87, .76, and .79.

Firstly, the author makes 25 undergraduate students fill in the questionnaire and set "why do you find yourself a perfectionist?" and "the personality of perfectionist" as a topic and organizes an open interview. All of the 25 interviewees, before the interview, regard themselves as perfectionism. Through testing, their scores in positive perfectionism questionnaire turn out to be average. Then, the author sorts the information and according to the scores in negative perfectionism questionnaire, four of the interviewees who obtain higher score and two of them who obtain less than others are selected to be the research objectives (Demographic Information, Table 1). The first four interviewees reveal certain tendency towards negative perfectionism (a survey (Zi, F., 2007) shows that if the percentage is higher than 95% or the total score is higher than 149, the interviewee possesses obvious feature of negative perfectionism while 85%-94% or 134-149 evidences certain tendency towards negative perfectionism) whereas the last two of the interviewees are found to be non-negative perfectionists. After that, a semi-structured interview is launched.

Table 1. The Demographic Information of the six Interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Negative Perfectionism - ZNPQ Score	Positive Perfectionism - ZPPQ Score	Type
Shui	F	21	161	103	Negative
Qing	F	20	140	99	Negative
Qin	F	22	134	98	Negative

Dong	M	23	134	88	Negative
Ning	F	22	71	103	Non-Negative
Ning	M	22	66	87	Non-Negative

3. Research Result

3.1 Cognizance: The Cognition of Authority of Negative Perfectionist and Non-negative perfectionist

3.1.1 perception of authority of negative perfectionist and non-negative perfectionist

As for the question “How do you look at authority?” and “Were you relaxed or nervous when communicating with the authorities?” The two groups of interviewees showed different perception. Negative perfectionists tended to describe their feelings with words like depressed and oppressed.

Shui said: The relation between the authority and me is the same to that between the tiger and rabbit. Upon approaching the tiger, the rabbit feels extremely oppressed. To be exact, this kind of feeling can be described by suffocation rather than fright. Although I am afraid of competition, I am competitive internally.

Qing said: I feel depressed but not afraid naturally. Maybe I am unconfident unconsciously.

Qin said: I am overwhelmed with fear, more exactly, oppression. I believe in Authorities.

Dong said: I think the value of the authority's exist lies in offering us a criterion. A sense of depression arose in front of the authority.

By contrast, non-negative perfectionists treated on the problem depending on situations. For instance, Ning (F) said: “At the very beginning, I felt nervous more or less.” Ning (M) said: “I will admit the authority of the things that is reasonable in my mind. I was very relaxed when talking with the authorities.”

3.1.2 self-comparison and comparison of authorities of negative perfectionist and non-negative perfectionist

The researchers mentioned that: “What kind of animal will you usually compare authorities and yourselves to?” The result is in Table 2.

Table 2. Self-comparison and Comparison of Authorities of Negative Perfectionists and Non-negative Perfectionist

<u>Comparison</u>			
Name	Type	Self-comparison	Comparison of Authorities
Shui	Negative Perfectionist	Rabbit	Tiger
Qing	Negative Perfectionist	Eagle	Lion
Qin	Negative Perfectionist	Little Mouse	Lion
Dong	Negative Perfectionist	Insect	Giraffe
Ning (F)	Non-negative Perfectionist	Little Mouse, Phoenix, Fish	Lion, Tiger
Ning (M)	Non-negative Perfectionist	Dolphin	Turtle

Generally, most of them compared authorities into strong and brutal animals; in contrast, they compared themselves into small and weak animals especially the negative perfectionists. For example, Qin said: I think I am a little mouse and authorities like a strong lion. I am very confident when the authority is absent. On the contrary, I failed to stick to my brief in front of authorities.” Dong said: “Authorities, in my mind, is a giraffe who is tall but lonely. Although it looks far, it is very limited. As to me, I am an insect.”

As for the non-negative perfectionists, their comparisons are more flexible. Sometimes, they prefer to realize the balance of power by many-to-one. Or they compare themselves and the authorities into two kinds of animals which would not fight with each other severely. For example, Ning (F) considered authorities as lions or tigers and compared herself to a little mouse, a bird, a phoenix or fish. Ning (M) compared authorities to turtles and himself a dolphin.

3.1.3 self-evaluations of negative perfectionist and non-negative perfectionist

When the interviewees were required to describe themselves by five adjectives, the four negative perfectionists employed both positive and negative words and all of them mentioned negative words.(Table 3) While, all of the non-negative perfectionists opted for positive words.

Table 3. Self-evaluation of Negative Perfectionists and Non-perfectionists

Name	Type	Self-evaluation (Five Adjectives)	Sensitive or Not
Shui	Negative Perfectionist	Self-esteemed, self-renewal, self-support, unlucky, ill-fated	Yes
Qing	Negative Perfectionist	Perseverance, <u>Weak Adaptability</u> , Self-understanding, <u>anxious about trifles</u> , eager for friendship	Yes
Qin	Negative Perfectionist	Active, Diligent, <u>Dillydally</u> , Brave, Persistent	Yes
Dong	Negative Perfectionist	Eager for Stability, <u>Mentally Uncontrolled</u> , Low Profiled, Passionate, <u>Lazy</u>	Yes
Ning (F)	Non-negative Perfectionist	Clever, Agile, Lovely, Energetic, Independent	Yes
Ning(M)	Non-negative Perfectionist	Kin-hearted, Pure, Calm, Cheerful, Sincere	Yes

Remarks: The words that underlined are negative evaluation.

When referred to the sensibility of perfectionist, all of the six interviewees thought that they are sensitive. However, the things that they were sensitive to are different. The four negative perfectionists were sensitive to negative evaluations from others and some negative things they could sensed. Shui said: “I care about others’ evaluation for me very much even their trivial behaviors. Qing said: “When I saw those I am on bad terms with talk about someone, I will speculate whether they are running me down.” Dong said: “I usually find fault with other’s words” Qin said: “When coming across something, I tended to consider that whether I had done wrong. I always felt that unlucky things will happen now and then.”

But Ning (F)’s and Ning (M)’s sensitivity referred to acute insight into things and the integrated environment. Both of them said that they would figure out others’ intention through even a look, a sentence or an action.

3.2 Emotional Level: Perfectionism and Anxiety and the Coping Style of Anxiety

For the question of “Do you have dreams repeatedly?” Qing gave a negative answer. Dong said he used to have but not at present. In his senior high school, many situations appeared in his dreams, such as “there are many houses and thick wires; I am flying and the wind is heavy.” Striking similarities existed between the dreams of Shui and those of Qin.

Shui: I was running and others were chasing me with sharp weapons such as guns or swords. I also dreamed to quarrel with somebody and felt exhausted after waking up.

Qin: I was running and others were chasing me. I felt very scared and the people around me couldn’t help me. I also dreamed some shy dreams -- naked in public. I also dreamed some dreams about guilty.

Shui and Qin often dreamed that they were running away or chasing by others. From the view of Freud, this is called anxiety dreams. The scared emotion can be explained as a theme of their life. Qing never had this kind of dreams but Dong had. In 3.2.1, there is no bitterly threatened relationship between self-image and authority image.

The two non-passive perfectionists both denied to have repeated dreams. Four passive perfectionists all adopted passive coping strategies that will arouse other passive emotions to avoid their own anxiety, such as complaint, eating and making many unrealistic plans; while the non-perfectionists tend to adopt positive manners: writing blogs, chatting, self-analysis, listening to music and going out.

3.3 Motivation Level: On the Life States Pursued by Passive Perfectionists and Non- Passive Perfectionists

The question of the forum is “What kind of life do you want-- A competitive one or a peaceful one?” Shui is fond of quiet, interesting and steady life and afraid of competitions. Qing likes comfortable life. She also emphasizes to grasp opportunities to show oneself, have moderate pressure and never becomes lazy in leisure. Qin is expecting quiet and interesting work. She thinks under this situation, it is difficult for others to surpass her and she can have a steady work. She is afraid to compete with others, thinking that she is not good at social interactions. Dong also expects peaceful life and he says he doesn’t like competition frankly.

On the contrary, non-negative perfectionists hope to colorful life. For example, Ning (M) says: “the former at young age, the latter at old age. Ning (M) also thinks we should experience all: to taste different situations at different ages.

Negative perfectionists prefer quiet, steady and comfortable life, which can avoid failure, punishment and sense of defeat to a great extent. Qin’s emphasis that “So others can never surpass me” explains that she is afraid of competition but meanwhile holds strong competitive consciousness. However, she can’t face competition straightly because of fear of failure and adopts a gentle manner to make up for herself.

4. Discussion

According to the Fei Zi’s research, the fear of authority is related with negative perfectionism (Zi, F., 2006); however, based on this research, negative perfectionists tend to express their feelings with such words as “depressive” or “oppressed” other than “fearful” to describe authority. When answering the first question, Dong doesn’t feel the strong sense of authority pressure, which may be related with his opinion that the authority image giraffe is a relatively mild animal. Despite the fact that Ning (F) is not a negative perfectionist, her authority image is minatory animals such as lion and tiger, so she shows fear and nervousness in face of authority. It is possible that the fear of authority of a necessary but not sufficient condition of perfectionism. Perhaps how to cope with the pressure of fear is an intervening variable of authority oppression and perfectionism. In order to deal with the inward fear of authority, one can choose to pursue perfection or other ways like evasion. One of Can Liu and Fei Zi’s research (2008) shows that the fear of authority is closely related with both obsessive-compulsive personality (characterized by pursuit of perfection) and avoidant personality, which explains that both perfection pursuit and evasion may be the ways to deal with the pressure of authority.

The self-evaluation of negative perfectionist is dominated by both negative and positive composition while for non-negative perfectionist, it involves positive composition. According to Burns, the representative personage of perfectionism negative trait theory, perfectionist has two kinds of psychological distortion, one of which is to dogmatically believe that negative event will emerge repeatedly in the future. For example, in the interview, Qin mentions that “it strikes me that something bad will happen after a while.” The repeated reinforcement of their autognosis in negative aspect determines the position of negative composition in self-evaluation system.

The research indicates that negative perfectionist shows strong anxiety and fear and is always haunted by anxiety dreams. Inspired by Horney’s three communication styles of neurotic patients (moving towards people, moving against people, moving away from people), the author puts forward the pattern that negative perfectionist deal with the anxiety can be summed up in four types: dependent style, fighting style, evasive type and analytical type. The author considers the analytical type as the one who can flexibly apply coping style, face and then ease the anxiety. In the research, all four negative perfectionists are prone to escape from the anxiety by negative coping strategy, so the author considers them evasive type. The non-perfectionist tends to be analytical type. The way that negative perfectionist deal with anxiety belongs to the first three types while non-perfectionist uses the coping style of analytical type. This hypothesis needs further investigation.

The qualitative study provides us with a new perspective to explore perfectionist personality, so we can give a comprehensive and vivid presentation about the personality traits of perfectionist, and get a deep and full understanding of possible intrinsic mechanism and outward manifestation. Nevertheless, the sample size of the qualitative study is usually very small, so the promotion of research conclusion should be taken seriously. This conclusion and theory based on interview materials in this research still needs further exploration.

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